DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 285 143 CS 008 918

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TITLE The Child Fits the Label.
PUB DATE [84]
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Academic Failure; Cognitive Development; Elementary Education; *Labeling (of Persons); Learning Problems; Learning Readiness; Reading Achievement; Reading Diagnosis; Reading Difficulties; *Remedial Instruction; *Self Concept; Self Esteem; Slow Learners; Special Education; Student Attitudes; Student Placement
IDENTIFIERS Reluctant Learners

ABSTRACT

A case study followed a child from birth to approximately age eight, recording his early successes with learning language and reading skills, and then discusses his academic decline after being labeled a low achiever and a candidate for remedial classes. The child had learned to construct words from magnetic letters at an early age, and by age five he was a relatively independent reader. Kindergarten and first grade reinforced his self-concept as a capable learner, facilitating his reading ability and other skills. However, during grade two, a substitute teacher criticized the monotone voice he used when reading aloud, and noted the number of worksheets he had not completed. The child was placed in a remedial class where his schoolwork continued to decline. He had adopted the label given to him, "remedial student," and behaved as a slow learner would. Transfer to a new school for his third year reversed the problem. His teacher began to rebuild his self-concept, rewarding him for improved work and encouraging his endeavors. Implications of the study include the notion that injudicious labeling can seriously hamper a child's academic progress, and damage his or her self-esteem. Additionally, remedial students need to be included and encouraged, rather than denied the possibility for academic achievement. (JC)

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The Child Fits the Label

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THE CHILD FITS THE LABEL

Introducing Matthew

Matthew was a bright, enthusiastic learner when he entered formal schooling, but within a short span of time he developed negative self-concepts. He succumbed to labels applied by "experts". Rather than helping Matthew to progress, the labelling isolated him and caused him emotional and educational injury. Matthew fulfills Kirp's (1974) observation that "adverse classification stigmatizes students, reducing both their self-image and their worth in the eyes of others" (p. 12-13). There are many children like Matthew in our schools, who unlike him, are neither fortunate enough to receive a second chance, nor are given the opportunity to have their damaged self-concept rebuilt by caring teachers.

The following account of Matthew's early education, in an Eastern Canadian school, is based on his mother's diary entries and school reports. All names have been changed.

Early Oral Language Development

Matthew was Ken's and Elizabeth's second child. Shortly after his birth, Elizabeth started a diary of "all the things he could do". At the age of seven months he said his first word, "Da Da!" and within three months had several words in his vocabulary. Telegraphic speech appeared at thirteen months when he said, "Want juice". His sister Jenny, two years older, soon started to teach him nursery rhymes and by twenty-seven months he would offer a rendering of "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" to

any visiting company. He was not in the least shy and even bowed after his performance.

Early Reading Behavior

Matthew was read to from a very early age and when he was about three years old, he memorized the eight page text of one of his sister's books. When Elizabeth noticed this, she began to point to words as she shared a book with him. Often he would take the initiative and do the pointing. Soon he began to construct words with magnetic letters. The refrigerator was quickly covered with words from his favorite books. After breakfast was a time when he enjoyed reading his words to his mom. He liked to make new words for his dad and to do this he used the letters from his oldest words when the supply of spare letters was exhausted.

He loved the rhythm of language in Seuss books and often sounded out nonsense words. His mother encouraged him to complete sentences and finish rhymes and before long, he read parts of the texts on his own. He tracked words with his finger and his reading was of a voice-pointing type. By age five, he was a fairly confident, though not totally independent, reader. Around age six, he could independently read some of his favorite books.

Playgroup and Kindergarten

In 1980, Matthew, age four, began playschool and enjoyed it tremendously. He was also involved in gym, crafts, music and swimming classes where he achieved many of the Red Cross badges.

His favorite sport, however, was soccer, which he started at age four and still plays. He looked forward to his visits to the local library where the librarian read stories and poems to groups of children and facilitated their participation in dramatic role play and puppetry.

French Immersion Kindergarten was equally successful and the end of year report described him as being "a very responsible student and a hard worker". His teacher recommended that he begin grade one in French in the Fall. His only problem was red - green color blindness which was confirmed by an opthamologist in 1981. Elizabeth noted how well he picked up French and even spoke it during play. As far as literacy was concerned, Elizabeth found the playgroup and kindergarten to be very similar. The teacher operated from a readiness model and read to the children and taught them initial consonants. They were being prepared to learn to read in grade one.

Grade One

Grade one also provided a positive educational experience with his end of term report placing him as satisfactory in all levels of the language arts. His teacher wrote, "Matthew is beginning to read quite fluently in English and he is an active participant in all English activities. Matthew is learning to apply his phonic skills to spelling and as a result is becoming more independent in written assignments. I am pleased with the progress Matthew has made and his enthusiasm for class activities".

It was recommended that he progress to grade two french.

Grade Two - The Slide Begins

Matthew loved school up to grade two. In this grade he had two teachers. The regular teacher was on maternity leave until January so the class had a substitute teacher from September until December. This substitute teacher, Mr. Nelson, contacted Matthew's parents in October to inform them that Matthew's reading lacked fluency, his voice was monotone and when asked to read more expressively, he mumbled. Mr. Nelson advised that Matthew's "ears be checked". The pediatrician found the referral amusing and assured the anxious parents that there was no problem whatsoever. Shortly after this, the parents were again contacted, this time to indicate that Matthew was not completing worksheets correctly and that often he handed in papers that were "all wrong". Matthew sat silent and rigid throughout this interview and later wept copiously in his mother's car. The teacher inferred that Matthew was stupid and from that day on, Matthew adopted this label. His fragile self-concept was shattered. Mr. Nelson suggested that Matthew "be tested for remedial reading". The regular classroom teacher, Mrs. Black, returned in January and Matthew was placed in a remedial class. The teacher there felt that he did not belong, but kept him as his classroom teacher felt he did not belong in her classroom. He was tested in February as the classroom teacher now described him as being a behavior problem. Matthew was now being treated as abnormal and he was behaving abnormally. The

basis of the referral for psychological testing was that he sometimes reversed b's and d's. The classroom teacher hypothesized dyslexia or to quote her, "Perhaps he has something worse than dyslexia". A very nervous Elizabeth met with the psychologist, classroom teacher and vice-principal to discuss the assessment. The report described Matthew as having a verbal I.Q. of high average to superior.

The teacher and the vice-principal shared the opinion that Matthew was capable of learning but that his parents had not raised him to be responsible. Elizabeth was advised to give him chores around the house and reward him for successful completion. As punishment for poor behavior, his favorite Saturday morning cartoon watching was to be forbidden. Elizabeth was also advised to do homework with him every evening. At times as much as three hours was required on weekdays and six hours daily on weekends. The nature of the prescribed homework was worksheets that he easily and correctly completed and the copying of poems from text books.

The decline continued and by the completion of grade two, his school report was dismal - D's in English and French. By this time Ken and Elizabeth were quite concerned, indeed the whole family was affected. What had happened to their bright little son who had been reading before entering school? Why, when he got one hundred per cent in nearly all his spelling tests, was he given a D in spelling? Let me quote the teacher's reason given on the report card. "I realize that Matthew studies hard for

the spelling tests, however, he does not transfer this knowledge to his daily work." In this same report card, the teacher spelled English with a small e!!

The school's advice was that Matthew repeat grade two and that his parents work with him on worksheets all summer. This was the last straw for the family. Doubts had crept in as to the advice of the authority - that is the teacher. Matthew cried a great deal at the sight of extra workbooks, so Elizabeth threw them away and decided to let him enjoy his summer. With great trepidation and anguish, they decided to change schools.

This decision proved to be the right one. Grade three was a wonderful year for Matthew. This new teacher was most sympathetic to this child's story and felt that his achievement scores were a reflection of his lack of confidence. Slowly and deliberately,with great patience she began the difficult task of repairing a damaged self-concept. By the end of the school year Matthew had B's in all areas of language arts and was awarded "Very Good" for effort.

The grade four teacher continued this excellent work and Matthew was awarded a commendation as the "Most Improved Student" in front of the whole school. This is still proudly displayed on the refrigerator at home six months later.

Matthew was so damaged by his failure in grade two that he still does not really like school and often lacks self-confidence. He has not yet recovered from his failing grade in Art and hates

to have to draw anything. He is loathe to answer questions in class for fear of being wrong and again being characterized as dumb. He does, however, love to work at the computer where he has no fear of negative reinforcement. Due to excellent teachers and caring parents, Matthew is beginning to recover from his detrimental labelling in grade two.

Implications for Schooling

> "Were you ever punished?"
> "Only for faults," said Alice.
> "And you were all the better for it, I know!" the Queen said triumphantly.
> "Yes, but then I had done the things I was punished for," said Alice: "that makes all the difference."
> "But if you hadn't done them," the Queen said, "that would have been better still; better, and better, and better!" - Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking-Glass.

Although this case study focuses on one child in one situation, it provides a backdrop for implications about many aspects of our schooling in today's world. Too often if a child's output does not match the prescribed achievement levels, teachers begin a search for causes and unfortunately this search may be completely one-sided - something is wrong with the child. Send him/her for diagnostic testing by "experts" so that we can name the "fault". Once we find perceptual problems, learning difficulties, reading difficulties, or low I.Q. we may feel somewhat relieved and our expectations for that particular child are immediately lowered. After all, she is doing well considering her I.Q. is 98!

Remedial steps are usually solely directed at the "deviant". The program gets repeated. That will do the trick! If not, take the "deviant" out of the mainstream and send him/her to the opportunity class. Many children who fail a grade level can repeat this level over and over and still not succeed because they are "recycled through a program that was inappropriate for them the first time and that may be equally inappropriate and of less interest to them the second time " (Jackson 1975, p. 615).

By diagnosing only in terms of within child factors, we place the responsibility for failure fairly and squarely in the lap of the child. By using clinical and psychological labels we do not help children, but rather place them in "educational slots" (Apple, p. 175). Scott (in Apple, 1976) suggest that "none of the corrective measures that are taken can possibly succeed in the intended way unless they are directed at those who confer deviant labels as well as those to whom they are applied" (p. 178). Attention is diverted from possible causes in the educational environment itself.

Given today's pressures on teachers to be accountable and the dominance of testing, I feel we will see more and more labels being applied to the so called abnormal. From experience in education we know how difficult these labels are to shake off. School labels are often assumed by institutions of further education. Partly through the use of scientific language, "educationally disastrous practices are not only continued, but are made to

sound as if they were actually more enlightened and ethically responsive ways of dealing with children" (Apple,1976, p. 180).

When the labelling of Matthew was not proving to be effective, the family was then labelled as irresponsible. On closer examination of Matthew's life, by grade two, schooling had become an anti-educational force. His attitudes to himself and schooling remain in the balance. Will he continue to grow positively,or will he again meet a teacher who will destroy an already fragile self-concept? What realistically are his chances of continuing to be taught by caring, sensitive teachers? Once eroded, a damaged self-concept is very difficult to repair. Many children, and indeed adults, although making excellent progress in remedial programs, still consider themselves to be failures.

Labelling of course does not only refer to testing deviant behavior. Every time we write a comment on a child's writing, we are labelling. It does not take a kindergarten child long to realize that the "bluebirds" are brighter than the "canaries". Often too we only focus on cognitive labelling and affective problems are relegated to the unimportant. We underplay the role of emotion in learning and imply that children who repeat grades look positively at their failure. For Matthew, the type of instruction he received "was a debilitating rather than a facilitating experience" (Harste, Burke & Woodward,1985, p. 14). Fortunately for Matthew, he had not lost his ability to procure language, but rather his faith in

himself to do so.

In this paper I have raised a number of questions concerning labelling. We of course need expertise in our field, but this expertise should be delineated by critical reflection and ethical considerations for human beings, rather than quasi-scientific efficiency. Rather than focus on a lack in the child, we should focus on determining what experience the child has had to facilitate his/her literacy growth and as educators, seek ways to enhance this growth. The secret of intellectual growth is not found in confrontation, obstruction, or the denial of access through labelling, but rather in inclusion, co-operation, the provision of easy access to knowledge and attempts to build on our common stake in cultural growth.

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